

Book Review

The Thoughtful Leader: A Model of Integrative Leadership

SARAH ELAINE EATON
University of Calgary

Jim Fisher (2016) *The thoughtful leader: A model of integrative leadership*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 177 pages, hardcover (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-4426-4308-6, \$ 39.95 CDN.

The thoughtful leader: A model of integrative leadership is divided into ten highly digestible chapters. Each one progresses logically to the next as Fisher methodically builds on concepts covered in previous chapters.

Fisher declares early in chapter one that “leadership is for everyone” (p. 6). The reader is drawn by the notion that leadership is not a birthright, but rather something anyone can learn. From the very beginning, Fisher is adamant that learning how to become a leader is an opportunity accessible to almost anyone, while simultaneously indicating that a foundational concept in the book will be learning to think about leadership from an integrated perspective.

In chapter two, Fisher outlines three common leadership models: managing, directing and engaging. Then, in chapter three, he proposes a model that integrates all three, concluding with a matrix that shows how the combination of approaches is more comprehensive and applicable in a variety of contexts. Fisher calls this is “9Box framework” (p. 154). Chapters four through six return to each of the components of leadership: managing (chapter four), directing (chapter five) and engaging (chapter six), examining them in more detail, through the lens of an integrated model. Fisher uses stories and real world examples to illustrate key points.

In chapter seven, Fisher points out that leadership models are inherently limited. He notes how models are used to simplify and make sense of various approaches to leadership but is careful to point out that “the concepts are more iterative and dynamic” (p. 101). A consistent through-line with this book is Fisher’s wise insistence that leadership requires deep thought and a willingness to tackle the complexities that come with a leadership role with wisdom. The examples, stories and models are offered as a means to make sense of leadership, but the undercurrent is that leadership is as much about thinking as it is about doing.

In chapter eight, Fisher further develops his matrix, layering on the notion of “leading in all directions” (p. 129), showing the role played by senior management; peer and support groups; the operating team and customers, suppliers and the community. This more complex model is cleverly introduced later in the book, once the reader has fully grasped the basic concepts individually and the matrix model presented in chapter three. Fisher scaffolds leadership concepts masterfully, layering one on top of the next until the reader is fully immersed in his highly sophisticated model.

Chapter nine is dedicated knowing oneself and understanding others. Fisher points out that leadership extends beyond merely understanding models from a theoretical standpoint, noting “Leadership is an activity that calls on all of our logical and emotional resources and an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the emotional and logical” (p. 135). In this chapter, Fisher brings forth the importance of understanding the human and emotional elements involved with leading. The final chapter concludes the book with reflections about how leadership is hard, but doable (p. 153), emphasizing the need for a thoughtful and integrative approach to leading.

Though the book draws largely on examples from the business world, the principles and models are easily transferrable to other disciplines such as education and public policy. Fisher’s style is easy to read and he has a flair for making complex concepts accessible to the reader. The book is versatile and appropriate for audiences in a number of contexts, from those leading organizations or departments to students of leadership in higher education settings.

About the Reviewer

Sarah Elaine Eaton, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor, in Leadership, Policy and Governance in the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.

Email: seaton@ucalgary.ca